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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002879

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/28/2019
TAGS: KDEM PGOV IZ
SUBJECT: SADRIST TREND AND ISCI OFFER PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor Yuri Kim for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Declaring its commitment to an open-list
electoral system, the Sadrist Trend this month held Iraq's
first primary election, claiming a likely exaggerated turnout
of 1.5 million. Days later, their electoral ally, the
Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), announced it too is
accepting applications to compete in open primaries. These
primaries are keyed to growing public demand for an "open
list" electoral system and will likely generate popular
interest, if not support, for the two parties. These
primaries could also increase pressure on other parties to
follow suit in accepting open lists. Finally, the Sadrists
and ISCI are likely to use their respective primaries to
claim the leadership position within their electoral
coalition, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). END SUMMARY.

Sadrist Trend Initiates Primary Season

¶2. (SBU) On October 16 the Sadrist Trend held an electoral
primary billed as an "open list" method for Iraqis to select
candidates to run under the Sadrist Trend banner for the
upcoming national election. After the vote, a Sadrist
spokesman claimed 350 polling stations received ballots from
1.5 million people. (Comment: This is likely an exaggerated
figure. End comment.) The spokesman said that of the 670
candidates, 83 were women, 25 percent held advanced degrees,
and an unidentified number were independents not affiliated
previously with the Trend. However, local media reported
that Muqtada al-Sadr himself vetted all the candidates and
rejected a significant number. PRT Wasit local staff members
visited a primary center in Al Kut on October 16 that was
buzzing with voters. There was no clear guidance on who was
eligible to vote, but large banners clarified the
prerequisites for candidates. According to these banners,
candidates were ineligible if they were ever members of the
Ba'th Party, worked for the United States, or ever supported
the U.S. "occupation" of Iraq. Sadrist officials stressed
these elections were held as an extension of the popular
"open list" system (endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the
preeminent Shia cleric in Iraq) by which voters can select
individual candidates, rather than only party blocs.

ISCI Follows...

¶3. (C) Following suit, Ammar al-Hakim, the ISCI chairman,
announced on October 21 that ISCI would hold a primary
election and called "all of the competent Iraqi people in all
of the Iraqi governorates" to put themselves forward as
candidates. Badr Organization deputy Tahsin al-Azzawi told
Poloffs that ISCI will only accept candidates that "believe
in the tenants of ISCI" and had never been high-ranking
Ba'thists. Vice President Abd al-Mahdi on October 22 proudly
told DCM that over a thousand candidates had applied to
compete in ISCI's primary.

¶4. (C) Azzawi said the Sadrist Trend accepted ballots only at
designated polling stations, but voters in ISCI's primary can

vote in four additional ways: by SMS text message, by email, through ballots distributed by the candidates, or at mobile polling stations sent to rural areas. To prevent double voting, a voter must provide his or her "jinsiya" (nationality) and ration card numbers. Abd al-Mahdi showed DCM an ISCI ballot for Najaf province that required the voter to handprint this information, along with date of birth, telephone number, and email address. (Comment: Gathering this information should also help ISCI build its voter database and improve get-out-the-vote efforts. End comment.) Qdatabase and improve get-out-the-vote efforts. End comment.)

...But Party Leaders Have Final Say

¶5. (C) The winners of the ISCI primary will be subject to one final interview by party leadership to ensure the candidate is able to "represent ISCI," Azzawi said. Once complete, the candidates will be ranked by the number of votes received and placed on the general election ballot in order until ISCI's still to be determined allotment within INA is fulfilled.

¶6. (C) When asked whether the primaries will by themselves satisfy the desire of Shia clerics for an open list national election, Tahsin said "no," asserting that the still pending election law must adopt an open list system. He admitted that like the Sadrist Trend primaries, some ISCI/Badr senior leaders will be exempt from the primary election and will automatically appear on the national election ballot.

Comment: Posturing for INA Power-sharing

BAGHDAD 00002879 002 OF 002

¶7. (C) The Sadrist Trend fared poorly in 2009 provincial elections, in part because voters blamed the party for its disastrous performance at the helm of the Health Ministry and lack of technically competent candidates. Displaying a surprising degree of new electoral savvy, its media strategy promoting the primaries has emphasized the need for educated professionals above other aspiring MPs, which should appeal to voters. ISCI probably did not originally plan to conduct a primary election, but was forced to copy the Sadrists lest it appear less democratic. In addition to demonstrating respect for Grand Ayatollah Sistani's desire for an open list election, both of these primary elections are probably a move to boost each side's bargaining position in advance of negotiations on power-sharing within their combined electoral list, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). Raja al-Khalili, an advisor to VP Abd al-Mahdi and Sami al-Askari, a rival from the Da'wa party, both told Poloffs that each side will cite high turnout in their respective primaries to attempt to justify a larger share of the INA's final seat allocation.
End COMMENT.
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